Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DECISION NOTICE:
River Junction Fishing Access Site (FAS) Improvement Project

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 2 Office
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(406) 542-5500

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes development of the River Junction Fishing Access Site (FAS) along the Blackfoot River in Powell County near Ovando, MT. Proposed development includes creating a parking area with 8-12 parking spaces, relocating the existing campsites and adding up to three more, and improving the pioneered boat ramp. The proposed work would provide better separation of the parking, camping, and day-use areas while protecting riparian vegetation and reducing human caused sedimentation into the Blackfoot River. The purpose of the proposed project is to accommodate public recreational use of the site and to prevent further degradation along this stretch of river.

Alternative A: No Action

If FWP were not to take action at River Junction FAS, users of this site would continue to park haphazardly and degrade current vegetation along the road and around the trees. Without an established footprint for parking and camping, pioneered areas would likely continue and expand over time. Without improvements to the access road, the road would continue to degrade and over time become more difficult to access the site.

Preferred Alternative B: Proposed Action

The preferred alternative would develop an upper and lower parking area with approximately 8-12 designated parking spaces to protect the native vegetation. The pioneered boat ramp would be improved as a gravel boat ramp. The proposed work would also provide better separation of the parking, day-use, and designated camping areas. (See Appendix E in the Draft EA for the preliminary concept plan for this preferred alternative.)

PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT

A Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed project was made available for public review and comment from June 6, 2012 through July 6, 2012. Legal notices were published in the *Independent Record* (Helena), *Missoulian, Seeley Swan Pathfinder,* and *Silver State Post* (Deer Lodge) newspapers. FWP distributed 19 copies of the EA and 25 email-notifications of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (http://fwp.mt.gov/), under "Recent Public Notices" beginning June 6. A statewide news release was also sent out and posted on FWP's website on June 7.

FWP received 10 comments with four in support of the proposed project, one that was neutral, and five that did not indicate overall support or opposition but did share concerns or suggestions related to aspects of the

improvement proposal. The following summarizes comments received and response from FWP where applicable.

1. **The following comments are representative of those offering general support for the proposed project:**

   - "I think that would be a great project. River Junction needs improvements. More campsites, a better road and more parking would all be great improvements!"
   - "I support the increase of parking spaces and camping areas at the River Junction FAS site near Ovando in Powell County."
   - "As a boater and Blackfoot River user, I am in support of improvements to the River Junction Access."

2. **The following comments include those that did not indicate outright support or opposition, but did share concerns or suggestions related to aspects of the improvement proposal:**

   - "Doubt it would ever happen but how about either getting rid of the 'back in' ramp all together, (i.e. make it a carry in style) or make it NON commercial use only."
   - "I think you should consider carry-in access (i.e. Scotty Brown Bridge). Perhaps consider carry-in at River Junction since Harry Morgan provides trailer access."
   - "I approve improving the road to River Junction but don't think the camping use is high enough to warrant the kind of improvements you propose."

     FWP Response: River Junction is an important access site for camping and boating in the upper Blackfoot and has historically included both camping and the launching of boats with trailers. Therefore, campsite improvements and a gravel boat launch will continue to be part of the conceptual site design. Also, the majority of comments were either in support of or did not object to improving the campsites or a trailer accessible launch.

   - I do not support limiting the number of trailer parking areas to 12 on the River Junction FAS. I think that is too few…Some restriction may be appropriate, but 12 seems light, given historic use that exceeds that amount. Otherwise I would support this action."
   - "I support your efforts to improve the parking but strongly encourage you to consider increasing the scope of the project. As proposed, 8 to 12 parking spots are not enough."

     FWP Response: The Blackfoot River Recreation Management Plan (adopted March 2010) provides direction for improvements at River Junction as part of the key considerations to maintaining desired conditions in Reach 3(where River Junction is located). This direction states, "recreational facility development or improvements should not result in a net gain in parking capacity." Additionally, one objective of the site improvement project is to appropriately accommodate existing use levels at River Junction. Based upon your comments, the number of vehicle parking spaces may need to be increased to accommodate current use levels. FWP will re-evaluate the number of parking spaces to accommodate existing use levels and incorporate that into site plan development.

- "On page 13, paragraph 5a you state that "this stretch of the Blackfoot is not considered critical fish habitat although waters upstream are critical..." This seems inconsistent with the statement on page 5 that "this stretch of the river is considered a red-ribbon stream..."

  FWP Response: The entire Blackfoot River is considered critical bull trout habitat and important fish habitat in general. Thank you for catching this inadvertent error. The red-ribbon designation is a separate type of designation that does not directly relate to the designation of critical habitat.

- "Are you going to be able to police the area more than you have done in the past? People will still want to camp and park their vehicles along the river bank at or adjacent to their campsite, and unless enforced, will want to continue to do so."

  FWP Response: Staff levels are not expected to increase as a result of the improvement project, and FWP will rely on existing staff to conduct routine patrols of River Junction FAS. Better defining the site footprint with designated parking areas, parking barriers and signage, as well as separating day-use and campsite-use areas should improve recreationists' abilities to determine appropriate parking and camping locations. As a result, the improvement project should facilitate enforcement efforts related to site use, rules and regulations.

- "I allow people to also use my adjacent property for camping and recreation and for the most part they do a good job of respecting my property. However, there are always a few that want to set off fireworks during the July 4 holiday and build campfires in unsafe areas. I would like to see you also police the adjacent areas, my property, since any fire hazards would have severe impact on all adjacent lands. I assume that improvement of the River Junction campground will bring increased use and with it some additional abuse of my property such as cutting firewood, leaving garbage, use of fireworks and driving off road, spreading weeds. Each year I budget to keep weeds under control but it is a real problem. Can you, or will you be able to police the surrounding area as well as the state campground. If not, I may have to cut off public use of my property, which I do not want to do."

  FWP Response: FWP is committed to working with and being a good neighbor to adjacent landowners. In addition to land-based patrols of Fishing Access Sites, river rangers conduct water-based float patrols to inform recreationists about river ethics and etiquette, pick up litter, monitor for campfires, break up pioneered fire-rings, and enforce rules and regulations. FWP will incorporate your concerns into routine patrols that currently take place on the Blackfoot near your property and is always happy to visit directly with landowners about ways to address concerns related to river recreation.

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA), along with the public comments and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, it is my decision to proceed with the proposed action with the exception that the number of parking spaces may be increased from the current proposal (8-12) to accommodate existing use levels at River Junction FAS. FWP will re-evaluate the number of parking spaces necessary to accommodate existing use and incorporate that into site plan development.

I have determined that the decision to proceed with the proposed action will not have a significant negative effect on the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. By notification of--and with the corrections and clarifications noted in FWP's responses to comments in--this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA. The draft EA with Decision Notice may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address on page 1. The EA is still available for review on FWP's web site (http://fwp.mt.gov/) under "Recent Public Notices" (enter "River Junction" in Search Public Notices).

In accordance with FWP policy, an appeal may be made by any person who has either commented in writing to the department on the proposed project, or who has registered or commented orally at a public meeting held by the department on the proposed project, or who can provide new evidence that would otherwise change the proposed plan. An appeal must be submitted to the Director of FWP in writing and must be postmarked or received within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must describe the basis for the appeal, how the appellant has previously commented to the department or participated in the decision-making process, and how the department can provide relief. The appeal should be mailed to: Director, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East 6th Avenue, P.O. Box 200701 Helena, MT 59620-0701.

For Mack Long

Mack Long
Regional Supervisor

7/31/12
Date